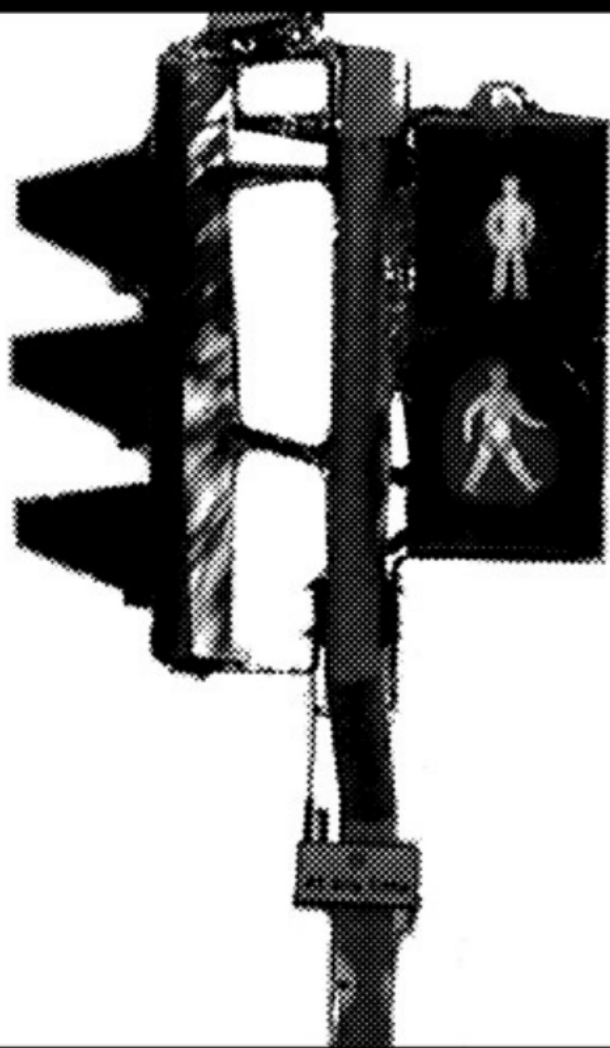


REDMANGREENMAN

by
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by M. Lazarus

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There was a slow repetitive sound, like someone pushing on a metal bottle cap over and over. Pok.Pok.Pok.Pok.

Pedestrian lights? Yes. He remembered them. He understood these lights. The system they'd introduced in Melbourne so that blind people could know whether to cross the road. Short slow beats when the crossing was red, and when it turned green, a rapid tinpop drumming.

The lights must be on red here.

Pok.Pok.Pok.Pok.

Like a shot, as the crossing turns to green, the popping noise becomes a machinegun.

Pokpokpkpokpokpok.

When the noise goes green, he hears a crack and feels something slam into his chest.

By the time he sucks breath in and begins to fall backwards, he has already twitched out of this place.

Pain sparks up and down his limbs and his head feels like it is separating, trying to break free, and there are those colours he can't normally see and it feels like he is falling from a building forever.

He came in and out of moments. He was locked in an office. No, now he was outside and someone almost familiar in a cap with a magpie on it was saying something to him. Then he saw a lady in a suit was giving him a cup of water and explaining something about time or maybe a man with a big head was shouting at him about ownership and then-

He doesn't try to move when he wakes up. He already knows he will be in a different place, and nobody is screaming at him or kicking at him yet, so after a bad one like that last trip, he was going to let himself get up slowly.

It was difficult to move. It was always like that when he had a violent shift.

He was lying on a hard cold floor. Some sort of tiles. He didn't even need to open his eyes to guess he had arrived in a bathroom. He couldn't remember much anymore, but he could tell that without looking. Even if he couldn't think in proper order like a normal person, he could do some things instinctively.

Very carefully he lifted himself off the ground and looked around. He bumped his head on something. Looked like he was lying under the sinks in a public loo. Not the most disgusting one he had ever woken up in. He liked these sorts of toilets, not just because they were cleaner, but because the cleaner ones tended to be in places in Melbourne fewer people used and knew about, so they were quieter. That meant he had some time to rest and collect himself.

He wobbled over to a sink and fiddled with the tap. It looked shiny and expensive, and best of all, it wasn't one of those automatic warm water ones. He let the water run cold for a moment, then leaning down, he drank greedy gulps until he couldn't keep any more down. A bad trip always left him thirsty.

His chest hurt a bit.

When his eyes cleared up enough to focus, he could see himself in the mirror. Black greasy hair with streaks of grey and a scrub beard.

He was wearing the same lime green polyester suit with the big lapels and that bright red shirt. Looking closer, he realised that the red of his shirt had run and was splattered along his neck and face.

No, the colour was not his shirt. He had woken up here covered in blood.

The blood looked like it had all come from the sore point on his chest. There was a sharp pain at the centre, like a hole should be there, but he couldn't see anything. The wound wasn't there. Maybe later.

He washed himself as best as he could in the sink and drank some more water. He felt terrible. It had been a bad one all right and he was too tired and shaky to get going, so he locked himself in one of the toilet cubicles and tried to sleep for a while.

When he woke up he heard footsteps and something rattling outside the bathroom, so he decided to leave. People were always chasing after him and shouting at him. It was better to get out of here before they had the chance.

He listened at the door until the noise went away and slowly opened the door. He could probably run now if he had to, after a bit of a rest. Creeping out he made for the first stairs he came across and let them take him down to a door to outside.

He found himself in one of Melbourne's alleyways. It looked like the sun was only just coming up. He hoped he hadn't ended up in one of the rainy seasons. He didn't like being out in the cold and the rain too much and you could never tell when it would rain in this city. He considered trying to find out exactly where he was and what the date might be, but he was too tired. Besides, he could feel there might be another after-fit coming on. That happened sometimes when he had a major trip. Sometimes he'd get a smaller little

tremble afterwards. There was no point in fighting it, since it just made him feel more sick. He closed his eyes and waited. The air around him started to feel noisy, like it was scratching and wearing against itself and his stomach felt like it was rising up.

When he opened his eyes, he was somewhere else. The sounds were different - noisier, busier, things rumbling past, the smell of exhaust about the place.

His eyes stopped hurting and he could focus on more than one thing, he had a look around. It looked like he was on Swanston Street again. He didn't know exactly when. These crossing lights didn't look too old. They weren't covered in half-ripped stickers yet.

He leaned against a wall and tried not be sick from the shift. There probably wasn't anything in his stomach anyway. A song about a wedding was playing very loudly from one of the shops, one of those ones always there selling tourist rubbish. You could buy little kangaroos and koalas and boomerangs there. He couldn't remember the name of the song.

People walked past and ignored him. He was used to that. That's how things normally were, when they weren't chasing him off. A man with a stained Cold-Chisel t-shirt threw the butt of a cigarette nearby. He considered picking it up, but wasn't sure how long he'd be here anyway. A kid was doing that half crying, half screaming thing that kids do. It was a little girl with her eyes all screwed up being dragged by someone he guessed was her mother. The little girl's hair looked like it had been cut at home. It was very uneven. The mother was dragging the girl along and looked like she was maybe going to hit her.

"Will you farkin' shut up? C'mon'n cross the bloody road, you stupid little turd," the mother said. She had her eyes half closed and she slurred when she spoke. Looked like she was pretty drunk.

"You gotta wait for the green man to cross!" the little girl said through tears.

The mother coughed and slapped the girl on top of her head.

"Geezus Christ, Marta, shut the hell up and come on. Cross the bloody road!"

"It has to be a green man!" the girl screamed.

The noisy little girl turned her swollen wet eyes and looked at him. Children didn't know you weren't supposed to look at people like him, so sometimes they would stare right at him when everyone else would walk on.

"Like him, mum, Red-man, Green-man" she said, pointing at him.

"Fer fuck's sake," said the mother and dragged the girl stumbling out past a slowly moving car. The driver of the car leaned out the window and swore

indistinguishably at them. The little girl was still making that crying noise and staring back at him leaning there

and then he couldn't feel the ground for a second and everything flickered and he was back on Swanston Street at a different time.

The girl in a cap is there and he's pretty sure they know each other, but naturally he can't remember.

"Redman," she whispered, as she shoved a package wrapped in clingfilm underneath him, "Just mind that for a moment, mate, okay? Will just be back in a moment. You're a champion, mate. Tip-top."

And then she is off trotting down the street and the police in their silly uniforms are chasing her and he stiffens and worries that they might be coming for him, but they just go after the girl in the cap.

He twitched.

Greenman is smoking a cigarette. He can't remember how that started. The girl in the cap shouted at him.

"Fucking hell, Red, don't hog it. We're sharing the durry."

Although he can still smoke by instinct, like he can drink and eat and scavenge and hide, he can't tell if the smoke is coming or going anyway, so he hands the cigarette over.

He was somewhere else again. The girl in the cap is huddling miserably in a doorway next to him as they avoid the rain. She's the same girl who cried and named him when her drunk mother almost pulled her arm off.

"Hello, Marta. I remember you were just a little girl a moment ago."

She scowled and swore at him.

"I dunno who you are, you shabby prick, but don't you bloody come up here and call me that. Where did you get that suit anyway? It's horrible. You may not have heard, mate, but disco's dead 'n'all."

"I have not heard that about the disco," he said nodding thoughtfully, "You called me Redman Greenman."

She snorted.

"Whatever, Reddy. You just keep to yourself over there and we'll get on like a goddamn house on fire. And don't call me that. I'm Art. Everyone in Melbourne knows me. Art. Art. It'll get easier if you practice."

He closed his eyes. She was a little girl a moment ago, and now she was dressing sort of like a boy. Her eyes darted back and forth at any age, like she was always keeping a look-out for the next thing.

There was a small heave in his throat and he was somewhere else. Greenman was running. He twisted back and saw three large and meaty men coming after.

"Stay put, you derro prick!" shouted one of the men. He had a sunburned face. Greenman was not going to stay put. No good ever came of waiting for angry people chasing you. He kept moving, his lime jacket flapping behind him as he dashed through a crowd of people in football scarves on their way in the same direction. Red and Black versus Brown and Yellow. That was Essendon and Hawthorn team colours, he thought. The big guys were still coming at him, sweating in their oversized t-shirts. They were too big and heavy to catch up with him, and Redman lost them pretty easily in the side streets up the top of town. He found an underground carpark and waited there until the sounds of the screaming man with the sunburn faded. He was breathing hard. His hands started to shake and he fell over.

"Christ, Greenman, why the hell are you panting? Are you sweating?"

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting on a bench in front of the State library. The girl Marta, no Arta, Art, was staring at him.

She adjusted her black and white cap.

"You are one weird bloke, Reddie. I reckon the government shouldn't let you wander around all on your own."

The girl passed him a grease-stained paper bundle of cold chips. Redman gingerly ate a few while Art threw pieces to the fat grubby pigeons that congregated in front of them.

"I was running," he said.

She snorted.

"Is this one of your fits? You loony bugger."

"I was elsewhere and a different moment. It isn't the same order."

"That's what I said, you're loony, mate, ainch't ya? You vanish from here to

there, don't ya, Reddy? You need to focus. Are you sure you aren't boozed or drugged out of your mind?"

Redman shrugged.

"Booze and the Persian Rugs messes you up, " Art says with a deep wise nod, "I don't do none of that crap. Focus, Man, focus. Keep your eye on the prize. That's all that matters."

Redman stared at a pigeon that looked like it had a stain of paint on its arse.

"Is that what your mum said before?"

Art glared at him.

"Reddy, listen close, my mum was one of the world's mob of losers. She was too off her face to make a bloody buck in her life. I'm never going to be like that. You need to get your shit together, mate, and make sure that you don't end up like that. Cash and comfort, Reddy mate, that's all there is."

Redman sighed.

"Speaking of, you got any money?" Art said cheekily.

Redman patted the pockets of his lime suit. All he found was a plastic ticket with the number 663512 on it. It looked like a wristband. He waved it pathetically. Besides the suit and shirt, it was the only thing that came with him.

"Sorry, nothing," Redman said and tucked the plastic wristband in his pocket.

Art snorted like that was what she expected, and Redman felt like he had disappointed her.

"You want some more chips?" Art said. Redman couldn't remember if he ate recently here, and it was always his instinct to eat whenever there was food, just in case, so he had a few more.

He burped saltily from eating the crappy chips too fast and he was jolted out from that time.

"Shuddup Reddy," she said as they skulked near a hairdressers.

"Are you going to get a hair-cut as well?" he said.

"Don't be stupid. I look amazing already. Anyway, shake a leg, mate. We don't want you to miss out. It's some community bullshit, apparently. They'll do it for nothin', the mugs. Can't miss a chance to give your raggedy head a trim. You look like you washed up on the shore, mate. This way, this way. That's it. Tip top."

He knew her from way back, even if he isn't sure that has happened yet. Art. Marta. Arta Marta.

She shooed him inside and he sat in the seat where they cut the dirty edges of his hair and his beard while Art looked on critically.

"Shit, man, who knew you'd be so solid with them coppers, Reddy," Art said, "Maybe you're too shitting wrecked and brainfried to look like someone who was holding and that sort of shit." she said. He nodded happily, although confused. "We don't make such a bad team, ey mate? And people gotta look out for each other out here, don't they?"

He held the clingfilm packet a while ago, but she won't remember that.

A man with a head shaped like a potato, a big red potato, was shouting at him about twenty-three years. He was swearing a lot and appeared to be very angry.

It was cold now. Rained more than usual. It was hard to tell in this town where the weather varied more by day than season, but Redman reckoned it was probably winter. Maybe. Art wrapped herself in a three-quarter length coat that was too big for her. She didn't seem to be growing into it whenever he saw her. Art paced up and down, trying to stay warm. She clicked her tongue when she noticed some muck on her pride and joy, her runners. She ripped a corner off a pile of unread local music magazines and scrubbed at the dirt on her shoes.

"We gotta find somewhere decent to hang our hats, Red," Art said, "It's getting too crappy around here. I'm sick of being soaked and every time I see you, you look and smell like a wet dog. Maybe we should get out of town for a few months. I've spent too many down seasons in the cold, Red, but I'm gonna get the cash so I can keep meself sweet. That's all that matters, Reddie, y'know?"

"Not much good at making money," Redman confessed.

Art laughed at this.

"No shit, Reddie, I like you, mate, but you are the most dizzy bastard I've met out here. Stick with me, I'll look after you, old fellah."

Greenman smiled at the girl.

She started pacing again.

"That said," Art sniffed, "Soon as I make my first million, you are on you own, pal. I'm outta here. I'm not like you. No reason I got to stay in Melbourne all my life."

He tried to explain why he never got beyond Frankston at the end of the train line. The thing was, he never knew where he would wake up. He knew Melbourne. He had known it, and would know it, more or less at any time, so he was comfortable there. The idea of going away terrified Greenman. He didn't want to be stuck in a time and place he hardly recognised. Because he had always been at the heart of Melbourne, he always would be, no matter where he ended up falling through space and time. He could manage that way. It didn't matter if it was raining or grey or hot and crowded. He knew this place. When you couldn't remember your name or understand why you kept spasming between points that other people didn't understand, you needed something solid.

Art didn't really get it, and he wasn't great at explaining things.

"Man, I'm going to move out to Sydney when I've made it big," Art said, looking far away to the other side of the endless curtain of rain, "Maybe even further away. Maybe I'll go to America, or maybe one of those hot islands. Somewhere it's always warm. I'm going to have a big house, Reddie, and a swimming pool."

"Haven't seen you get that yet," Redman mumbled. He tried to make it sound hopeful, to explain that he hadn't seen her say goodbye yet.

Art shook her head.

"You can't live like this your whole life," she said, "All wanderin' about and falling off the world all the bloody time. You gotta focus, Reddie. You ain't young anymore, are you, mate, and I'm not always going to be around to look out for you. I got my own plans to think about."

Greenman nodded like he understood.

Art scowled.

"C'mon, mate, I presume you don't want to be a derro for the rest of your days," Art said, "There must be some sort of hope and dream even in your fried head. There must be somethin' you want?"

Greenman thought for a moment and he smiled.

"Just company," he said.

Art frowned.

"Huh? You want to start a company?"

Redman shook his head slowly.

That wasn't it. He wanted to be in one place for a while and to have people who would talk and take to him, without his lurching backwards and forwards and away alone to another spot.

Art sighed and extracted a plastic case from her coat and offered it to Greenman.

"I got these from outside a health food place. Teatree toothpicks. I think they're some hippy bullshit to help smokers quit. It's all bullcrap, 'course, quitting smoking is just about having some self control."

Redman took one of the offered toothpicks and chewed on the end.

"Your mum smokes, I remember," he said.

"I don't got no mum anymore, Reddie. You know that. You know I don't talk about her."

He tried to explain that he was sorry.

Art grinned and the cloud passed from her face and was forgotten. She started picking at her teeth.

"I mean, if I'd got hold of a bigger box of these splinters, I coulda made a decent bit of cash off selling them on to some guys I know, but I was interrupted by some angry little bastard who started screaming at me and waving a newspaper like he was going to crack my skull with the weekend edition. I had to get out of there, quick smart."

"Hard for them to catch you," Greenman said.

Art kicked the air.

"You bet your arse, mate. Nobody can catch me. Hey! Don't just be chewing on that toothpick, man. Get in those gums. You got to look after your teeth. You don't want your choppers to go to the bad."

Greenman agreed.

Art looked thoughtful and adjusted her cap.

"Listen, Greenman, I've been hearing some stuff lately that might make us a bit of cash. Nothing definite yet, but some people are interested in you. I might be able to arrange something. You ever heard of Harry Goode?"

"Not yet," he said.

"Yeah, you know, the Whitegoods King - has a big shop down Elizabeth Street and couple of other places. Fridges and washing machines and all that sort of crap. They've got that shitawful jingle - 'Goode's has the Goods!'"

"What does a fridge seller want me for?"

Art shrugged.

"No idea, mate. I'll ask around, and maybe we can make a buck or two out of the fat old bastard."

"No good for money. Can't do it, it doesn't add up in the right direction," Greenman said solemnly, "But if it'll help you, Art, sure."

Art laughed.

"Can't do money! Reddie, that's the damn understatement of the year."

She had an appointment to meet with someone about selling some tickets to a sold-out band at the Corner. Anyway, Greenman's fingers had started twitching and his eyes rolled back and he soon fell away elsewhere.

Art grabbed his hand.

"Geezus, Greenman, where the hell have you been? This ain't the time for one of your junkie walkabouts."

She started dragging him by the hand.

"Come on, we're late,"

"Late?" he mumbled, staring blankly.

Art sighed.

"Seriously? Focus now, Greenman, look at me eyes. We have the chance to make some bloody proper money, remember. Listen close now, I'm going to explain it again. There's two mugs interested in talking to you. One lot is that Goode's family, the other is some posh lady we are going to see now. I found 'em both, mate, and they're both going to cough up if they want to meet you."

"Why me?" Redman said.

"Who knows, mate? Maybe you're the lost heir to the fortune, who got bonked on the head and got that amnesia or some crap. Maybe they have a particular soft spot for fry-brained homeless dudes with terrible fashion sense. The important thing is that they both want to talk to you, and that, my friend, is what you call a competitive situation. We'll see who'll pony up the most for an interview with Mr. Greenman Esquire."

Art was talking a bit funny. Her lip was cut and there was a bruise on the left side of her face.

"What happened to you?" Greenman said, "You weren't hurt before. Are you all right?"

Art waved her hand impatiently.

"I told you already. Just some financial disagreements with some of the Fitzroy boys. Don't worry about it. I've got everything under control. Now will you come on?"

Greenman blinked and he was in the room with books again. He hadn't walked there yet. That part must be later. A petite middle-aged lady in a navy-blue suit was staring at him fascinated, like there was something bizarre in his beard. Art was sitting in a worn leather armchair and fidgeting nervously. Greenman looked down at his hands and discovered he had an old University-branded mug in his hand filled with water.

The lady stared at him expectantly.

"Mr...Greenman?"

He nodded.

"Are you with us now? How extraordinary."

Art shrugged.

"It's not that big a deal. His mind goes off elsewhere all the time."

"Goodness, no. Not just his mind. I believe, yes I honestly believe he was gone from here for a moment."

The lady spoke slowly to Redman like he was stupid. Art frowned at this, but said nothing.

"Mr. Greenman, do you know where you are?"

Redman nodded slowly and looked around.

"In the room with books," he said after a moment's thought.

"And how long have you been here?"

He looked blank.

"Have you ever been in this room before? Have you ever seen me before?"

"Long time ago, I think" said Redman.

"You can't take what he says too serious, Missus," whispered Art, "He gets a little bit confused."

The lady ignored her.

"Mr. Greenman, in fact, from our perspective, you have been in this room for the last ten minutes, and we have never met before today. Do you remember my name? I do beg your pardon, have I told you my name yet?"

Redman shook his head.

"I am Mrs. Ghosh, Mr. Greenman, and let me just say what an extraordinary surprise and a pleasure to discover you actually exist, not to mention my being fortunate enough to meet you in the actual flesh!"

Art frowned at Mrs. Ghosh.

"Lady, you better not be wasting our time here. You aren't part of some stupid cult or something, are you? Not that we mind, but Mr. Greenman and myself are only here for the reward."

Mrs. Ghosh took a mug of coffee back down from one of the many bookshelves that lined the room.

"I'm sure we can work out some sort of small compensation for your time, Ms...Art, was it?"

"Just Art, thanks, lady,"

"Certainly, Art. It is wonderful to have you here at the Institute. Tell me, Mr. Greenman, do you know why you are the way you are? About your condition, I mean?"

Redman shook his head. He didn't think about that sort of thing.

Mrs. Ghosh clapped her hands.

"My goodness! Just as Vasilich theorised! Oh, if only he was still alive to see this! You are a unique oddity, Mr. Greenman, and something of an urban legend in Melbourne history. I must admit, I didn't completely believe in you myself until you set foot in this room!"

"Wot," said Art.

Mrs. Ghosh stood up and paced back and forth like she was talking to a larger audience than a girl in a coat and Magpies hat and a shabby man in lime-green and red.

"The Lecture Institute has been running for several decades now, and back in the earlier days of this city, when there was experimentation with LSD and that sort of thing - you have to remember that was long before my time here, and a long time before I imagine you were even born, Art."

Art snorted at the idea that there was anything interesting or significant back then.

"Anyway, there were a lot of...odd drug trials. Back in the day, we believe

there was work on a wide variety of perception-influencing drugs. They signed up anyone they could get for trials. Derelicts, lunatics, the desperate and the poor. It was all a bit Wild West back then when it came to ethics and procedures. Anyway, the story goes that they gave an experimental drug to somebody that unhinged them from the normal perception of time."

"For serious?" Art said, "You jokers think that's Reddy? Come on now. Pull the other bloody one."

Mrs Ghosh paced.

"There have been several researchers here at the institute who have theorised about the matter, not just Vasilich - there was Perry, Zovich, Kent - but of course the names won't mean anything to you. It was something of a thought experiment, yes, but there have been scraps of evidence over the years."

"Seriously? Reddy?" Art said doubtfully, "You ain't taking the piss? You reckon he might be some kinda accidental time travelling man?"

"We are all time travellers, in a way," Mrs. Ghosh said, "Your friend, Mr., uh, Greenman may simply, theoretically work through time differently from the rest of us. There were arguments that hypothetically such a case may result from a particular disassociative effect - "

Greenman's eyes flickered and he was walking into the room of books with Art.

"Can I offer you anything?" Mrs. Ghosh said with her scientific smile.

"I would like some water," said Greenman after a moment's thought.

He twitched again.

"So who is Reddie, then?" Art said, scratching her nose.

Mrs. Ghosh tapped her chin.

"That's part of the issue. We have only vague knowledge of what might have produced a subject with temporal disassociation, because records from that time could be dubious or nonexistent, given the questionable ethics and legality of these tests, you see?"

Art thought about this.

"So you dunno, right? Because they were dodgy buggers. Too bad, Reddy, otherwise maybe you could sue."

Redman shrugged. He was having trouble focussing on the conversation.

"Don't know anyone called Sue," he mumbled, which made Art snicker. That made Greenman smile.

Mrs. Ghosh wasn't paying attention anyway. She was just excited. Redman didn't mind. He was perfectly happy to sit still inside for a bit.

Art picked her teeth and tucked her feet up under her body, ignoring the way the lady's eyes narrowed at the sight of Art's sneakers on the chair.

"Righto, so ages ago, a bunch of curious brainy dicks shot Reddie up with some untested junk, like probably in exchange for a stew dinner or a couple of bucks or a nice pen or something. Now my man Greenman is all screwed up in the head, living on the streets, can't get or hold onto a job." Art sucked at her teeth. "Seems like Reddie's owed something for that."

Mrs. Ghosh folded her hands and smiled at Art indulgently.

"Indeed, Ms...Art, it is most unfortunate. It is important of course, for me to underline that experiences inflicted on your comrade were in no way the responsibility of our Institute. We are simply a collection of the curious of Melbourne - academics, intellectuals, amateurs, and interested parties. The rumours about Mr. Greenman have been a topic of ebullient discussion for many decades now. The Lecture Series first became interested in you, Mr. Greenman, through the work of Ms. Sandra Hawke, an artist and photographer who joined our little organisation some time back. Ms. Hawke happened to be working on an archival project for the National Library - she was working through a collection of photographs of Melbourne taken over the last century, and she discovered something rather interesting."

Mrs. Ghosh extracted a scrapbook from the bookcase behind her and with cautious fingers, presented it to Art and Greenman.

Three photographs were arranged on the double-spread. the first was the fuzzy colour of the early days of amateur photography, and depicted a crowd on Swanston Street. The second was a picture of some random individuals at Flinders Street. The last was a print outside the unfinished Federation Square.

Art squinted for a while.

"And what? Yeah, now I see it."

Mrs. Ghosh beamed.

"Yeah," said Art, "There are people who look like Reddie in all of them."

Mrs. Ghosh clapped.

"Yes, well done! But what do you notice about your comrade in these photographs?"

Art shrugged. "I dunno, he's in the same shitty suit?"

"Exactly!" said Mrs. Ghosh, "In fact, if you look at these pictures that happened to capture Mr. Greenman over several decades, you will no doubt notice that he is always wearing that same suit over a period of thirty years!"

Art coughed.

"Sure, if you say so," she said.

Greenman was about to tell the lady with the books that he only had the one pair of clothes, but Art shushed him.

Art figured that if this woman wanted to think that Reddie was some sort of magic drug case, that was her business.

"Of course, there's more evidence than that," Mrs. Ghosh went on, "Besides the stories that have circulated about the drug trials, there have been anecdotal reports about Mr. Greenman, but he has been notoriously difficult to pin down. Just when we receive word that someone matching his description was spotted, he would be impossible to find for several months. We've been trying to find your Mr. Greenman for a good many years now, in fact."

"Sorry?" said Greenman.

"Well, here you go, Mrs., here he is, large as life and twice as out of style," Art said, gesturing at Greenman.

He smiled uncertainly and took a sip of his water.

"Let's cut to it, Mrs.," Art declared, jumping up from her seat and pacing the room. "If you guys reckon Redman is some sort of medical wonder, what will you and your librarians part with to spend some quality time with him?"

Mrs. Ghosh spread her hands.

"Well, obviously, we are very interested in talking to Mr. Greenman, and perhaps to learn more about him, and perhaps running some...basic tests, and we could certainly extend a gratuity for your time, but you have to remember that we are an organisation devoted to research and study - our funds are...limited."

Mrs. Ghosh offered up a number with a smile. It didn't mean very much to Redman Greenman, but Art scowled and pulled her hat down.

"C'mon lady, be fair," she said, "That amount of cash won't do us for even a damn week. You and your lot sound like a pack of damn tight-arses, let's be honest here. If you ain't willing to pay up to interview my guy, then we will go talk to another organisation interested in Greenman that is a bit more cashed up, ey? I hear that the Goodes have been wanting him for a long time, and I'm sure they won't piss-fart around when it comes to talking compensation."

Mrs. Ghosh stood up and frowned.

"I wouldn't recommend that. Mr. Goode's interest in Mr. Greenman is somewhat less...academic than our own."

Art shrugged.

"Yeah? Well maybe what's in his wallet will be less academic too. C'mon, Greeno, let's get outta here."

He was already gone.

His neck hurt when he came to the next place and he felt like all the energy had been drained from every part of his body. He tried to think about the meeting in the room with the books, but it kept slipping out of his mind. It was too hard to concentrate. Redman wished Art wouldn't get so worked up. She worried too much.

He looked around. Wherever he was, the kid wasn't here. He was alone. Looked like one of those huts in the Botanical Gardens. There was lots of lush green foliage stretching out on every side and angry black swans fighting on the edge of a small lake. The rain was pattering down, tapping lightly on the roof of the hut. It was quiet and relaxing and Redman figured that in this sort of weather he probably had a while before someone would tell him to move on.

He closed his eyes and listened to the rain and the honking of the swans and tried to sleep.

He woke up a few times in different places - shuddering backwards and forwards on a tram, in some sort of shelter in a hall, sitting against a gravestone. Each time he peered bleary-eyed about the place to make sure that nobody was coming to shout at him and chase him and hit him wherever he was, then he cautiously closed his eyes to rest again until he felt he had enough sleep to get up and move.

He was back in the Botanical Gardens, but it wasn't raining anymore and the swans were gone. Going through some bins, Redman found some half eaten sushi rolls in a plastic container, one of those little plastic soy-squirting fish still in the packet. Looked like avocado or something inside. Whoever had thrown away the few remaining bites had put on too much wasabi. It burned in his mouth and nose and it wasn't very much of a meal, but at least he had managed to get something in his stomach.

He burped and retched.

When he looked around again, he was in Fed Square, which was an easy one to recognise because it was built from all those funny awkward angles. Redman was sitting on a crooked step that looked like it should be uncomfortable, but wasn't too bad. When he was cleaned up enough, Greenman would find a big library. Libraries were sometimes better than malls like Daimaru or Q.V.. They didn't usually have people who would chase him or throw him out. When he could find places like St. Kilda library sometimes, they didn't mind him sitting there for hours, reading newspapers. He didn't really understand a lot of what was in the newspapers, but all the other people who sat and slept through the day there made a pretence of reading through the papers and magazines, so Greenman did likewise. He had read a bit about this squashed and pointy square right opposite Flinders Station. It had been controversial. Or it was going to be. He couldn't remember. There was a big television screen on one skewed wall of Fed Square showing a series of music videos of bands playing in lanes around Melbourne. Redman didn't get to see much television. He stared at the big screen as the light of evening slowly disappeared.

Someone kicked him lightly. He turned around to see Art was lying a step up, wrapped up in her coat, her overlarge running shoes poking out towards him.

"Don't stare at the box so much, Reddie. Telly makes you dumb and blind."

"It's interesting," he mumbled.

Art yawned.

"Never mind that junk. Mate, if these lunatics think you're some sort of local urban legend and are willing to pay good hard cash to ask you deep probing questions about your life, who are we to tell 'em otherwise?"

Redman nodded uncertainly.

It was sometimes tricky for him to work out what Art was trying to tell him, but she didn't usually get too annoyed with him.

"Don't sweat it, mate. If the nerds won't cough up, then the fat man sounded pretty keen to shell out a few pineapples our way. Pretty soon, Reddie, you'll have enough to buy your own big stupid telly."

He smiled at Art.

"Where would I put it?" he asked.

Art kicked at him again.

"You stooge. You gotta get some property. I'm gonna get me some property,

Reddie. Can't go wrong investing in land. I'm gonna have enough to buy a bit of ground and a roof that nobody can take from me, and nobody can come in unless I let 'em."

"Sure, Art," Redman said.

She closed her eyes.

"Don't worry about the meeting with the fat man. I know it didn't seem like it went that brilliantly and the old bastard and his son have got shitty tempers, but yours truly can turn it around, no worries."

Greenman felt like something hurt in his face, but wasn't sure if that was happening yet. It was nice to see Art again, so he nodded like he understood what she was on about.

Art had sourced a packet of Twisties - chicken flavour - from who knows where. She passed them over to Greenman, and he chewed slowly at the spirals of incomprehensible flavouring.

They were half way through the pack when a bunch of young men with popped collars came through Fed Square. Redman could smell the booze on them. He lowered his head. Art chose that moment to look up and to stretch her legs.

"Farkingshit," one of the collars said.

Redman tried to avoid making eye contact with them. They sounded angry and noisy. He wanted them to leave him and Art alone.

One of the collars with bright blonde hair who was struggling to walk in a straight line elbowed Greenman. He swayed to and fro. All of them laughed.

"Piss off, you fuck-knuckles," Art shouted at them. The bright blonde one tried to grab Art, but she danced around him.

"Leave us alone, ya dumb bastards" she said, "If you aren't going to give us something to help us out, you can just piss off and leave us alone. Go on, you arsholes, go root each other or something."

One of the late night crowd pushed Redman again, this time without any real conviction.

"Please don't do that-" he muttered, but the guy was pointing at the lime-green suit and laughing. Art started screaming and swearing at the booze-eyed youths, who were poorly equipped for handling a hyperactive lunatic darting here and there like an angry hummingbird. They made a few half-hearted retorts that were lost under the constant shriek of Art's invective, and knowing this was a fight they had no idea how to win, they wandered drunkenly off, talking too loudly about avoiding loonies amongst themselves to save face.

"That's right, ya pricks!" Art said kicking the air behind the ruminating drunks. She turned to Greenman and winked at him, taking off her hat.

Greenman laughed. It felt funny in the nerves in the side of his face and the muscles somewhere behind his guts.

"No need for that, honest," he said to Art.

Art shrugged.

"Bunch of useless bloody dipshits, Reddie. Did you see them? All cashed up with their fancy clothes 'n that and they spend their time and moolah on getting boozed? It pisses me right off, I tell ya."

"Thanks, anyway."

"No worries, no worries," she said, "After all, you're a mate, an'chya?"

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said, "Good to have a mate."

"Course it is! Who would keep an eye out for ya, if not me, ey?"

Yes, he knew that there were long stretches of being on his own, wandering the streets lost in Melbourne. It was good to be recognised, to have a place in someone's time.

He yawned and stretched out. The big television in the side of Fed Square was cycling the same jangly bands in their alleyways and funny hair and hats. Art was absent-mindedly kicking her heels in time. Redman closed his eyes, enjoying the repetition of the music videos and content to listen to what came next.

When he woke up, he wasn't properly in. He was shuddering back and forth, not quite going along with everyone else. It wasn't an enjoyable place to be stuck. In that jammed moment, Redman was on the ground, holding his knees and someone was kicking him in the ribs. His eye hurt too. Probably someone punched him not that long ago. He stuttered back and forth - the leg drew back and drove the toes of a boot into his side over and over - the same kick forward and backward, there and gone along with the pain in his ribs. Redman screwed up his eyes and tried to calm down so that the looping reiteration of pain would stop.

It was a relief when he eventually felt a lighter kick graze his shoulder. He was unstuck now and moving on.

"What the hell are you smiling at, you stupid derro?" a voice screamed at him. Greenman hadn't realised that he had been smiling. The voice screaming at

him was raw and hoarse. It sounded like it had been shouting at him for some time. Greenman felt sorry for himself, with his sore eye and ribs, but he felt a bit sad for that angry voice, too.

"You'll do what you're told, you stupid bugger," said the hoarse voice, "I won't put up with this bullshit anymore. You'll give him whatever he wants and I don't have to hear anymore about this crap, okay?"

Redman wasn't sure what was okay, but he tried to nod, as that seemed to help stop the kicking.

He waited and crawled until he sunk into another place.

When he looked around, he was back where everybody had those glass things in their hands. People swarmed past, all of them staring at the reflective whatever they carried, poking at them with their thumbs.

"Jeezus Christ!" Art said, "That's a nasty knock you took there, mate."

He was pleased to find he was back with someone who knew him.

She was staring at his bruised eye and was going to poke at it when he waved her hand away.

"Still hurts," he said.

"Not surprised, champ. That's a nasty one. See what happens when you are out on your own? We need to get something out of these pricks - get us both behind doors, yeah?"

Redman nodded. His neck hurt too.

"Just let me do the talking, orright, Reddie?" Art said, rearranging her cap and wiping the lapels of her coat, "I'm good at business, yeah? Best if you keep quiet. You might weird them out and shit all over the whole deal. We want to sell you to those rich arseholes, make 'em think you are whatever the hell they think they're looking for. Geezus, no offense, mate, but I don't know what they think they all see in you."

Art waved her hand up and down in his direction.

He nodded in agreement.

"C'mon then, champ. This could be our golden payday. Chin up, keep quiet and let me sort all of it out."

Greenman thought about this for a moment.

"Sure, Art. I trust you."

"Good man! Tip-top!" she said and slapped him on the back, "Just try not to

let them see too much of that nasty eye of yours. Maybe give 'em your best side."

They walked through the front of one of Goode's shops. Art whispered to a young blonde lady and she ran off half-heartedly to find someone. While they waited, Redman stared at the rows and rows of things to buy. There were refrigerators and washing machines and televisions and all sorts of other things with screens made of metal and plastic and wires that he didn't really understand. All over the place were bright yellow cardboard signs in the shape of cartoon explosions that had 'We've got the Goodes!' in excited letters written on them. The exclamation mark on the sign was so big it looked to Greenman like it was going to gobble up all the rest of the words written in black Texta underneath.

Eventually the blonde lady returned and led them through the rows of black and white objects, through a back door, and down underneath the Goode's megastore. She left Art and Greenman at the office of Mr. Goode and since she seemed more nervous the closer they had come to this point, she looked glad to be rid of them.

At the door was a big man wearing a suit with no tie who was playing with one of those glass things in his hand.

Art whistled at him.

"Oy, mate, stop posting naked photos of yourself and let us in, will ya?"

The man in charge of the door scowled. He looked Art and Greenman up and down and was unimpressed.

"What are you two? A cheapo comedy double act or something?" he said.

"Don't be a tool," Art said, skipping from foot to foot, "We're here to see Mr. Goode senior. Announce us like a good fella, will ya? Tell him Art is here with Mr. Greenman, as promised."

The man at the door rolled his eyes.

"Christ, fine, shut up. Go on in, but you just watch yourself."

Art nodded manically at him and Greenman mumbled a polite thank you as they walked past into a office with cardboard boxes stacked all about. At the end of the room was a desk sandwiched between two filing cabinets and sat there was a fat bald man in a shirt open at the chest. The fat man's chest was oddly smooth, and he looked to Greenman like a giant obese baby. The man was eating a meat pie with a plastic knife and fork with dainty care. In front of the desk a slightly less obese version of the fatman with a shaved head was pacing up and down, dressed in the same gear as the door-guard - suit, shirt

and no tie.

"Geezus, dad, do we really have to go through this bullshit again?" the pacing man muttered.

His voice sounded familiar to Greenman.

The fatman ignored his son and continued to cut serenely at his pie.

"Let your old man eat in peace will ya, Robby?"

Robby made a disgusted noise.

"Hello," Greenman said.

Art bounced over and helped herself to a seat.

"G'day, Mr. Goode. Gotta say, thought your office would be a bit more plush than this."

Mr. Goode chewed at a soupy mouthful of mince and crust and stared at Greenman with an intensity that unnerved him.

"No need to show off in here, is there?" the fatman said, his eyes never wandering from Greenman, "Wouldn't help the business any, would it?"

The younger Goode leaned over Art.

"You better not be trying to be pull any funny buggers stuff here, you little shit," he whispered, "I know you. You're nuthin'. A little alley rat. I heard you were one of the thieving turds who ripped off that shipment last year, and if I had my way-"

Greenman frowned at Robbie Goode.

"Don't talk to my friend that way," he mumbled.

"You say sumthing, Disco?" Robbie snarled.

Art smiled sweetly.

"Don't worry about it, Reddie, Robbie here is just a big bloody sook. He's like a little doggie that has had the snip, all bark and no balls. His old man keeps him on a short leash. He won't try anything."

Despite the fact that it would take about five Arts to even come close to the size of Robbie, Goode junior looked like he was very seriously considering punching Art right in the football cap.

"Robbie," the fatman said, chewing at a bit of gristle. Even his voice sounded fat and oily.

"Kids today, ey, Mr. Goode?" Art smirked.

Goode senior stared at Art. He nodded at her hat.

"A Pies supporter? No wonder your life has ended up this way. Terrible goddamn team with a bunch of dumb arseholes for barrackers. Look at you. I was assistant manager by your age, kid."

Art shrugged.

"Probably 'cos your old man ran the shop. Who the hell do you support in the footy, then?"

"Who gives a shit?" Robbie snarled.

"We're Richmond supporters," the fat man said, "Tiger Blood since the year dot. That's a proper team. Not like you Collingwood pricks. Whatabout your mate here? Dunno any team that has green and red for their colours."

Redman shook his head.

"Are you talking about the football? I don't understand it - it's all back and forwards and back and forwards and-"

Art shushed Redman.

"It's beaut and all to have a good chin-wag about the footy and that," Art said, "But let's talk business. You and the Librarians want my man Reddie. I'm here as his agent to see if we can agree on a reasonable price."

Robbie snorted.

"This is fuckin' ridiculous," he muttered.

"Shuddup Robbie," the fatman said, "Those uppity pricks think they have some claim to this guy? Don't you believe it. It was the Goode family that pumped the money into the drug trials that made your man here. That was before companies had even thought of cashing up proper research and that sort of crap. The Goodes have always been ahead of their time. We deserve our goddamn credit, yeah?"

Redman frowned.

"Your family funds the thing that made me this way?"

Mr. Goode nodded slowly.

"Yeah. If you are what this kid says you are."

Robbie threw his arms in the air and roared.

"No, Dad, it's a load of bullshit. This dodgy little bogan is a bloody termite, and this guy in the fluoro suit is just another homeless loony picked up from the gutter. Seriously, do we have to go through this crap again? There are little tackers who are less bloody gullible than you, old man."

Mr. Goode Senior chewed for a while.

"You gotta respect the family, Robbie. We did something good. We put good money in. We're owed. People need to know that the Goodes pushed the boundaries of the science and that."

"For fuck's sake!" said Robbie, "Nobody gives a shit about any of that."

"Huhm," snorted Mr. Goode, wiping his fingers on a napkin, "The thing is, we'll see, won't we? Our family has been chasing the man for a long time. We aren't stupid enough to stump up the cash for some random, are we?"

Robbie grunted in agreement.

Art waved a hand.

"Settle down, Goodes, it's all good, ey? Reddie is the man. He's totes whatever you weirdos think you are looking for. He's your magic drug man or whatever."

Art looked meaningfully over to Redman. Greenman tried to nod in return. His head felt like it was on strings.

"The number you suggested is bullshit, I'm sure we can all agree," grumbled Goode senior.

Art shrugged.

"If you want to be a tight-arse, Mr. Goode, that's up to you. I'm sure the posho academical types are able and willing. They'll be happy to take credit for Reddie or whatever, right? They probably look down on a working man like you, don't they, Mr. Goode?"

This all made Greenman nervous. His leg was tapping up and down. Everyone ignored him but it felt like he was drumming through the floor. His leg spasmed more and his skin felt it was coming loose.

He felt sick. He was walking up the steps of the Athenaeum and Art was saying: "Geezus, Reddie, are you alright? Keep it to together. This could be good money for us."

Redman spasms back and forth. He can't find his feet. Him and Art are somewhere near the University.

"Robbie sounds like bad news," Greenman mutters.

Art shrugs.

"Yeah, I heard he messed up a guy bad because of some shady stuff, but I can

handle it, champ, don't worry."

Art hands him a can of Creaming Soda and winks. Greenman can feel kicks in his ribs from another place. He can feel himself fading and he tries to hold on to this moment. He wants to cry, because he knows it is no use. Greenman feels himself being pulled back to a place he doesn't want to be.

Robbie Goode is swearing. Art is ducked down low and looking like she wants to spit in his eye. There are the two guys in suits behind Robbie, trying to talk him down.

"Robbie, settle down, mate, it doesn't matter, none of this matters," one of Robbie's offsiders says. Every time they lay a hand on him he twists away.

Then they backed away with their hands held up.

"Come on now, mate," one of them said.

Robbie Goode had pulled a gun.

"My entire fucking life I've had to listen to the old man go on about this bullshit!" Robbie screamed, "I'm sick of it!"

Art squinted a look up at him.

"Geezus, are you crying, Robbie?" she said.

Redman wanted to tell Art to shush, but he felt bad in his bones.

"Shut your face, you little feral," Robbie said, waving the gun like he was angrily conducting some orchestra nobody else could see, "I am not going to waste any more of my life on this fucking bullshit, do you hear? It's my time! Mine, you get it?"

The guys in suits tried to hold Robbie back, but he was furious and strong and he had the gun waving at Art.

Art's eyes opened wide. Redman saw that she couldn't skip and run away this time. He felt things slow down.

Greenman sighed. He stepped slowly and carefully forward in front of Robbie, standing between Art and the gun.

When Greenman ground at his teeth waiting for an age, and after a little bit of forever, things started moving again.

Something hit him in the chest.

"Christ, Robbie, you lunatic," somebody shouted, "What the fuck?"

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't fucking matter! They don't matter!" Robbie

wailed.

Redman fell to the ground, a growing horrible pain in his chest.

Art leaned over him, horrified.

"Reddie, mate, come on, mate, focus on me!" Art shrieked.

Greenman would have tried to tell her to relax and that everything was tip-top, but he felt too terrible.

Maybe he would do it later.

He floated down between times. Black streaked across all the moving colours. His chest hurt so much. But Art was okay. That was a small thing that was big for him. He sank and sank outside everything, and Art's screams became more and more distant. He felt like everything was finally stopping and Redman wondered if he could relax and rest for a while.

There was a whole lot of nothing.

And then there was the sound of a crossing light drumming tinnily in time. The flashing signal waiting for the change.